

Towards an Intellectual, Moral and Cultural Resurgence in Sri Lanka

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Written historical and semi-historical records of Sri Lanka like the Dīpavamsa and the Mahāvamsa speak of the island's past as dating back to more than two thousand years. Real traceable history seems to begin with the arrival of Buddhism from India during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa. Legendarily, the first reports of life in the island are associated with the Buddha himself. There is definite evidence even in these legends that Sri Lanka has had long periods of primeval history, dating back to the Old Stone Age. What is amazing is how writers of Sri Lankan history pack very dexterously several long phases of human history within a few decades of the Buddha's life.

During what is believed to be his first visit to the island, the Buddha is said to have confronted the earliest inhabitants of the land who are referred to as ' raw-meat eaters '

[*lohita-bhakkhā*]. They are also presented as ' not knowing about the production and use of fire.' Their eventual disappearance from the island as a historical phenomenon can also be discerned in these early records. It is hinted at that a high-level culture that would emerge from a religion like Buddhism could not come to co-exist side by side with these primitive people [*yakkhā nibbāsiyā idha*]. On the other hand, our own archaeological evidence like the existence of the Balangoda man points to the presence of several levels of primitive culture in the land.

The Mahāvamsa makes out that the Buddha made his second visit to Sri Lanka a few years later to settle a dispute between two warring brothers who seem to present a very high culture level. They were making heated claims for the throne [a gem-set chair, as they say = *maṇipallāṅkahetunā*].

Leaving aside questions of fact and fiction, all these chronicle reports indicate a desire on the part of the compilers to highlight the cultural impact of Buddhism on the history of the island. A time interval of nearly a thousand years, more or less, separates the Buddha from the time of the genesis of the chronicles. Thera Mahinda's arrival in Sri Lanka witnesses a considerably high level of culture in the land. We hear nothing of a Stone Age culture at this time.